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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the usefulness of indirect complaints (ICs)--i.e., expressions of dissatisfaction about someone or something not present--as a strategy for negotiating interaction for second language acquisition. In contrast to a direct complaint, an IC can be used to attempt to establish solidarity with an interlocutor. The language corpus consisted of 70 sequences of spontaneous conversation in which ICs were uttered. Subjects were university students, faculty, faculty family members, and staff. Six possible types of response to ICs were found: (1) no response or change of subject (4%); (2) response requesting elaboration (11%); (3) response in the form of joking or teasing (6%); (4) contradiction or explanation (12%); (5) advice or lecture (15%); and (6) commiseration (52%). Female and male responses were compared. While the expectation of the study was to identify formulaic responses (e.g., "oh, you poor thing"), no such response emerged. Even commiserative responses were highly varied in structure and intent. Results confirmed earlier research findings that equality of status is a common characteristic of ICs. Most commiseration responses occurred among status equals with neither minimal nor maximal social distance. An 18-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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Building rapport through indirect complaints: Implications for language learning[1]

Diana Boxer

This paper reports the results of a pilot study on indirect complaints; collected data contained six response types and these are described. The paper further suggests the usefulness of indirect complaint sequences as a strategy toward the goal of negotiating interaction for second language acquisition

Learners of English need to be made aware that there exist ways of interacting verbally with native speakers that will enhance their ability to get to know and develop relationships with English speaking peers. Such knowledge can be important not only for lessening their own sense of alienation in a foreign country, but also to give them an opportunity to communicate more in their second language, thus increasing their comprehension of input through negotiated interaction.

Recent research in second language acquisition (Gass and Varonis, 1984; Hatch, 1978; Long, 1980, 1983, 1985; Pica, 1987; Pica et al., 1988; Pica, Doughty and Young, 1986; Pica, Young and Doughty, 1986; Varonis and Gass, 1982) has posited that negotiated interaction is an important condition for successful second language acquisition. The term "negotiated interaction" is used here in a cyclical fashion. First, from the perspective of sociolinguists interested in SLA, it is viewed as a means toward the construction of social relationships. Second, from the perspective of SLA researchers, negotiated interaction has to do with exchanges between native (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) in which they work toward mutual comprehension through their joint efforts at modifying their input and output (Pica, Holliday, Lewis and Morgenthaler, 1989).

Thus it is posited that there is a link between negotiated interaction and opportunities for learners to signal their need for and receive input adjusted to their current level of L_2 comprehension. This in turn provides NNSs with: 1) opportunities to receive feedback on the comprehensibility and appropriateness of their interlanguage output and 2) opportunities to modify the phonological, morphosyntactic, lexical and pragmatic features of their interlanguage in response

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to NS requests for greater comprehensibility. It remains an empirical question as to whether the comprehended input, feedback on comprehensibility or modified production have a long-term destabilizing effect on the learner's interlanguage. The important point here, however, is the distinction between sequential and negotiated interaction; sequential interaction pertains to the smooth, sustained progression of discourse in which a successful social exchange between learners and NS interlocutors is realized while negotiated interaction pertains to the restructuring of discourse until mutual understanding is reached (Pica 1989, personal communication). Successful sequencing can provide learners with NS interlocutor solidarity which can open up opportunities for negotiation, comprehension of unfamiliar L_2 input, and interlanguage modification. It is hypothesized that sequential and negotiated interaction will alternate with one another in an iterative fashion as the relationship develops. What should logically ensue is increased opportunity for learners to build on these friendships with native speaking peers to expand their linguistic abilities in the second language.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the usefulness of indirect complaint (IC) sequences as a strategy toward the goal of negotiating interaction for second language acquisition. The term "indirect complaint" is used here in contrast to formal, or direct complaint (DC), in which disapproval is directed to an addressee held responsible for the perceived offense. IC will be defined as "the expression of dissatisfaction to an interlocutor about someone or something that is not present." The two types of complaints are indeed distinct speech acts eliciting different responses. Whereas DC is typically a confrontative act, IC can be the opposite when it is employed by the speaker in an attempt to establish solidarity with the addressee.

The analysis of IC sequences to be carried out here is based on the assumption that speech behavior is highly patterned at all levels. Thus it is only by looking for larger categories of speech behavior as opposed to studying each speech act in a category in and of itself, that we can attempt to determine the motivations that underlie what people say to one another. By doing this we are brought to the realization that some of these speech acts are motivated by similar underlying strategies; these strategies are realized through a series of moves in a negotiation between participants in an interaction. One major strategy that can be isolated as the common underlying dimension of this subset of speech acts is the attempt to create and/or reaffirm solidarity. Since it is the speech act itself (e.g. complaining) that constitutes the first move in this effort at relationship building, and since the speaker's success depends on the addressee's willingness to participate through the

give and take of negotiation, we can classify such speech acts as "openers": speech behavior which functions in a manner indicating a desire to establish some commonality with the addressee. This commonality need not be anything as major as shared race, religion or ethnicity. It may simply be a subtle indicator of shared feeling or mutual interest. When we think about how ICs function to initiate a topic of conversation, we see that they can and often do fall into the category of openers.

The manner in which the addressee responds to an IC can significantly affect the outcome of an exchange. That is, depending on the type of response elicited, a complaint sequence can affirm or reaffirm solidarity among the interlocutors or alienate them from each other. The implication for learners is that if one wishes to accomplish the former, that is establish some commonality with the speaker, the addressee will need to know how to respond to ICs when they are used as conversational openers.

The corpus of this study consists of seventy sequences of spontaneous conversation in which ICs were uttered. The group studied was the University of Pennsylvania community: students, professors, faculty and student family members, and administrative and support staff. Data collected through participant observation of this group provides examples from a range of speakers varying in age, occupational level and gender, as well in numerous other attributes. A spectrum of role-relationships among subjects is also represented. In the corpus six possible response types were found: a) zero response or change of subject; b) response requesting elaboration; c) response in the form of joking or teasing; d) contradiction or explanation; e) response in the form of advice or lecture; f) commiseration.

The following table summarizes the distribution of responses among the six response types noted above.

response type	percentage of responses
a. zero response, change of subject	4%
b. response requesting elaboration	11
c. response in form of joking, teasing	6
d. contradiction or explanation	12
e. advice or lecture	15
f. commiseration	52

a) Zero response or change of subject

In the corpus of ICs, only 4% of the possible responses fell into the first category, that of zero response or change of subject. Such responses were uttered in situations where the addressee was tired of listening to a speaker complain, where the addressee knew the speaker to be a constant complainer, where there was decreased desire for solidarity, or where there was a high degree of social distance and the complainer was of higher status. In this last case, the assumption is that the addressee would be less likely to respond to a complaint from a speaker of higher status, as advice or contradiction would be inappropriate and commiseration might somehow place the addressee on equal footing. By offering no response in such a situation, an interlocutor of lower status might be merely signaling acceptance of the complaint. Thus this category contained sequences of ICs in which interlocutors varied in their relationships vis a vis the factors of social distance and social status. An example of a situation in which the addressee changes the subject will illustrate just how such a response can foil an opener. The sequence is on the topic of vacations:

1) 1...the last couple of times we went, with the kids, away, you know, it takes a day and a half to get anywhere cause you spend six hours on an airplane.
2 So you stayed at...Hotel. We liked that place.

Since I was the addressee in this sequence, I am able to offer insights into why my response was in the form of a change of subject. Having listened to this female acquaintance, whom I know to be a chronic complainer, I was frankly tired of her complaining and eager to get on to more positive subjects. Though I have known the speaker for several years, she is someone from whom I wish to distance myself precisely because of her constant complaining. Only during the analysis of the data did I realize why I, a person who typically commiserates, did not do so with this interlocutor.

An additional type of complaint that elicited zero response was what is termed the "rhetorical complaint." Such a complaint is typically uttered for the purpose of letting off steam and is often addressed "to the four walls." As such, a response would not be expected. With rhetorical complaint it often happens that another person is present, usually a close friend or intimate. The rhetorical complaint appears to approximate a "response cry", in Goffman's terms (1978), but does not fit into any of his categories precisely. It differs in important ways from his pain cry (e.g. ouch!)

and spill cry (e.g. oops!) in that it is typically more elaborated. To illustrate the difference, an example of a rhetorical complaint from the data follows, in which a husband says in his wife's presence:

(2) I tell you, I'm so tired of being sick!

What is significant about this category of responses is that in none of the examples from the data were the interlocutors attempting to establish rapport. Thus we see that zero response or change of subject occurs at both ends of the social distance continuum. In the rare case (example 1) in which the participants are potential friends, such a response plays an important strategic role in deliberately discouraging solidarity.

b) Response requesting elaboration

When the addressee wanted to get more information about the reason for the complaint he/she requested elaboration. Such requests are sometimes delaying tactics that eventually lead to a response such as advice, contradiction or commiseration. Nevertheless, they sometimes serve as a more subtle way of displaying interest in the speaker by drawing out the complaint in a more elaborated version, thus giving the speaker more opportunity to vent his or her feelings.

An example from the corpus will illustrate this category. Here we have a male/male dyad between a lecturer (L) and his teaching assistant (TA):

(3) TA One thing about the computer class--these people don't know Lotus
L They don't?
TA Not well enough, I don't think. It's like I have to back track to get back to some basics

Only after asking several questions drawing out the complaint did the lecturer begin to give advice. In all the examples from this category the addressee seemed to want to get more information about the reason for the complaint in order to better understand the situation. In the case above it was the role of the lecturer to get to the heart of the matter, as he was responsible for the teaching going on in the class under discussion.

Another case of question response, in a conversation between a male professor and his colleague having lunch at a campus restaurant, the addressee seemed to ask the question as a strategy to keep the conversation flowing. From recent research on

language and gender (e.g. Fishman, 1978; Maltz and Borker, 1982) the expectation would be that women use questions more than men do as a response, since they have been found to use questioning as a strategy for maintaining the flow of a conversation. The few instances of this type of response that turned up in the pilot data, however, were mostly in male/male dyads, but the total number was too small to see any pattern emerge. It will be necessary to investigate whether a larger corpus displays any gender differences in this type of response.

c) **Response in the form of joke/teasing**

Gender differences appeared significant in other categories of responses, one of which was response in the form of joking or teasing. The literature on language and gender has shown joking to be a more typically male response than female response across varied speech situations (e.g. Coser 1960; Edelsky 1981). In the corpus only 6% of the responses fell into this category, but the majority of these turned up in conversations between male friends. Interestingly, this response type surfaced over the topic of a mugging and rape that took place in the neighborhood of one of the interlocutors in a male/male conversation over lunch in which the participants are status equal friends:

(4) 1 You've gotta be careful where you walk at night because there's a lot of muggings. They had two rapes.
2 Did they blame you? (laughs)

As this is a topic that might make any addressee feel uncomfortable, one way of making light of it would be to turn it around into a joke. But it is appropriate to joke or tease only if the subject is not of serious consequence to the speaker. Had the muggings or rape personally affected the speaker, a more serious response would have been expected.

Status and role relationships between interlocutors appeared to be important in this category of responses. Only one of the sequences in which joking or teasing was the response occurred among interlocutors of unequal status, a female student/female professor, but social distance between them had decreased significantly since the beginning of the semester. Among sociolinguists it is now widely believed that social closeness can override status inequality. More examples of jokes or teasing between interlocutors of unequal status but with decreased social distance may begin to substantiate this belief.

D'Amico-Reisner (1985) found that in her corpus 56% of the indirect disapprovals were about other persons, 27% about things and 18% about self. It may be significant that in my own data four out of five sequences in the joke/teasing category contained either complaints about the speaker himself/herself or a response that jokingly turned the complaint around in a mock-blame of the the speaker. Given this, it will be important to take a closer look at the use of humor in such a situation. The use of jokes or teasing in response to an indirect complaint may be an important strategy for the negotiation of roles and relationships. It may very well be one way for the addressee to tell the speaker that he or she is approved of and accepted. Indeed, it may be the primary way in which male interlocutors get close to each other.

d) Contradiction

One way for the addressee to tell the speaker that the complaint is not approved of and accepted is to contradict the speaker or take the part of the object of the complaint through some kind of defense on its (his/her) part. Approximately 12% of the pilot responses were of this form. In analyzing these data, it was interesting to note that these sequences either involved intimates, status unequals with social distance, the desire for social distance, or non-native speakers who may not have been aware of socially inappropriate responses. It appears that one is more likely to use strategies such as contradiction either when one wishes to distance oneself socially from one's interlocutor or when contradiction is well within the power and role relationships of the participants. Two of the sequences in this category involving power inequality inherent in role relationships were in professor/student interactions. In one, the teaching assistant mentioned in an above example complained about the non-responsiveness of a group of foreign students recently arrived for executive education training. The lecturer's response was to come to the defense of the foreign students. In the other sequence, involving the same lecturer with a doctoral advisee, the lecturer came to the defense of their shared discipline. In both of these examples, roles were strictly defined, despite the fact that the participants were very close in age or perhaps because of the minimal age gap. This very young faculty member, who was no doubt the same age or younger than many of his students, may have needed to crystallize the status differentiation in order to feel comfortable in his role as a lecturer.

Two sequences in this category were complaint responses from male non-native speakers of English. One was a response to a female classmate who had

complained about a male lecturer, a graduate student inexperienced at teaching the subject matter. The male non-native addressee defended the lecturer by saying, "he's not a professor. How would we do if we if we had to teach?" What is so interesting about this particular response is that the corpus was filled with commiserative responses by female native speakers on this same subject (as will be discussed in the category of commiseration). The question, then, is do these non-native speakers miss the opportunity to establish rapport with their complaining interlocutors by not understanding the functions of the speech behavior of IC?

e) Advice or lecture

A fifth category of complaint responses was that of advice or lecture. Fifteen percent (15%) of the pilot data fell into this category, with two-thirds being male responses. Of the total for male responses, one-third took place among status unequals with social distance (e.g. teacher/student). This would be expected, given these two variables: it is the role of a lecturer to advise or lecture. Likewise one-third of the female responses in this category was between female professor and female student. It is interesting to note that although the male lecturer's comments to his students were put in terms of straightforward moralizing, the female professor's advice was put in terms of making the student feel better. For example, one of the male lecturer's responses was as follows: "that's what you get for waiting until the last minute." Contrast this with a female professor's response to a student complaint about transcribing tapes: "well, so you do other things and when it goes on you start writing. You can answer letters or do anything." Embedded in her response is embedded reassurance. An interesting example from the data comes from a conversation that took place in a male professor's home during a conversation between friends about their pre-adolescent daughters; *1* is a female friend, *2* the professor's wife and *3* the male professor:

(5) 1 The thing is, I'd like her friends to feel comfortable coming by. But I'd also like there not to be a lot of unsupervised time. But given the fact that....
2 They're so difficult, these questions!
3 I would say if there were no boys, I wouldn't object to it.

The setting was familiar, the topic of extreme importance to the interlocutors. Yet the wife commiserated with the friend while the husband gave advice in the form of what he would do. The salient variable here seems to be gender. A careful analysis

of the data showed that conversations among status-equal females rarely exhibited responses in the form of advice or lecturing. The six responses that were between status equal male friends ran the gamut of topics and all took place over lunch in campus restaurants. In the following, the speaker complains about unwelcome visitors to his new New York apartment:

(6) 1 That apartment has caused me more grief than you can possibly...
2 Why?
1 Cause as soon as everyone found out I was in N.Y., it's like, you know, everybody...
2 That's the way it goes!
1 Bull!
2 You take the burden on!
1 No, there's no way. I haven't even gotten...no, there's no way!

What we have here appears to be an attempt to outpower each other. Maltz and Borker (1982) note that men's speech across North American subcultures is characterized by storytelling, arguing and verbal posturing. Such verbal posturing often consists of "practical jokes, challenges, put-downs and insults" (p. 212). From these preliminary data it appears that challenges, advice and lecturing or moralizing are common in male complaint responses. By far the vast majority of female responses to complaints in the pilot study were in the form of commiseration.

f) Commiseration

Of the total corpus of complaint responses, 54% were in the category of commiseration, with almost two-thirds of these coming from women. Included in this section are all responses that showed either agreement or reassurance, responses in the form of exclamations having an embedded commiseration, contradiction phrased in a manner attempting to make the speaker feel better, and any other response having embedded agreement, such as a one-syllable utterance in which some prosodic feature indicated commiseration. In sum, included was any type of response that had the illocutionary force of trying to make the speaker feel better. The inclusion of some of these subcategories no doubt added to the male total of commiserative responses. Without the contradictions, for example, the male portion of commiserations would have been considerably lower than one-third.

The most common type of commiserative response was in the form of straightforward agreement with the speaker, elaboration of the speaker's complaint, or some kind of confirmation of the validity of the complaint. Most of the responses

in this category were by female addressees. The following example is taken from a conversation between two female graduate students about to do a homework assignment together:

(7) 1 I'm getting more and more lost
2 So am I
1 And yesterday he went over the homework, which is ...fine, but it didn't prepare us at all for this week.
2 Now. He's just not a good teacher.

Whereas the first response is straightforward agreement, the second contains agreement plus an elaboration in the statement that the object of the complaint is "just not a good teacher." Such responses were frequent in the female portion of this corpus. One or two of the female responses went so far as to finish the speaker's sentence. By filling in the missing word, the implication is that the addressee knows exactly how the speaker is feeling and completely commiserates.

Prosodic features also entered into some of the responses in this category and often served more than one function. A mere one-syllable response, with high/low intonation, can be a signal of agreement and thus commiseration. The next example is taken from a conversation between female graduate students talking in the student lounge:

(8) 1 We went to a party. It was so funny. It was full of Germans. Now I'm used to interacting with Germans and Dutch people, but I was in a different context. So I meet these people. "Hi, I'm (name). And they look at you and say, "yes?"
2 Um (high/low intonation, as if "wouldn't you know!")

One of the advantages of having tape recorded the complaint sequences was the ability to capture such prosodic features. They would necessarily have been absent from field notes, causing more difficulty in interpretation.

Various types of exclamations served as commiserations both by female and male addressees, although more frequently by women. The following exchange took place in a departmental library. The speakers are a female graduate student and the library assistant, also a female graduate student. They know each other by face but not by name:

(9) 1 They never have what you need in here! You'd think they'd at least have the ...
2 They didn't have what you were looking for?
1 No.
2 That's typical!

Through her exclamation, the assistant is signaling that she identifies with the student and commiserates, even though at the moment she is in the employ of the department. The fact that the two are of equal status, that both are students, makes it easier for commiseration to take place. Had the assistant been the librarian, the complaint would have been one of direct rather than indirect disapproval, and the addressee would have been put in the position to either defend or apologize. As it was, it was not the responsibility of the assistant to make sure the library contained all the needed material. Thus status equality played a major role in the type of complaint response uttered. Here it overrode social distance. Indeed, the data showed social closeness to be a less important variable in the category of commiseration than was equality of status. Both friends and acquaintances commiserated, the latter in an attempt to get to know each other better.

Male addressees often used the strategy of advice or moralizing even when they commiserated:

(10) 1 I feel that he's letting me down, you know. This is my time of need. When it was his time of need I came through
2 With children it's all
1 I know
2 It takes ten children to take care of one parent. And they forget it was one parent who raised all of them

In the same conversation, the addressee above became the complainer when he told of the poor quality of his secretary's work. The addressee responded, "You can't get people to do good work." Such responses, it appears, fall into the category of commiseration despite the moralizing. The intent, based on the prosodic features present, was to tell the speaker, "I know that's the way it is, and I feel sorry for you."

In addition to moralizing, addressees, in this corpus mostly men, used the strategy of contradicting a speaker in order to make him/her feel better. We saw earlier how this strategy does not signal empathy, but in three cases in the pilot data it appeared to have the force of commiseration: the addressee was attempting to get the speaker to feel better about a given situation. One sequence was on the topic of

money spent and two about time spent. The following male/male sequence is on the topic of leisure time:

(11) 1 Are you planning any vacations?
2 No. It's hard to get away...other than the mountain house.
1 That's a great vacation!

Only seven of the thirty-seven sequences involving a commiseration response were between interlocutors of unequal status. In six out of seven the commiseration was from the individual of higher status to that of lower status. Although commiserative in nature, these responses took on some form that indicated a power difference.

The expectation when beginning the pilot study was to get responses that were formulaic to the extent that they would approximate something like, "oh, you poor thing." No such response emerged, nor very few that even closely resembled this. Instead, even the commiserative responses ran the gamut of possibilities in structure and intent.

The pilot study confirmed D'Amico-Reisner's (1985) finding that equality of status was a common characteristic of IC. But while she looked at the complaint itself, the focus here was on the response. What both studies have in common is the finding that the complaint and the response have the potential of creating solidarity between participants through the realization of shared feelings. By commiserating with the speaker, the addressee is telling him/her that there exists among them such shared feelings. Carole Edelsky (1988, personal communication) suggests that indirect complaints to friends or strangers serve as requests for acknowledgment of one's perspective. As such, they cut down "existential alienation." After all, it is only the "horrible, serious things" that elicit sympathy. The "everyday, miserable things" ought to elicit commiseration. This study has begun to substantiate this intuition.

Thus the majority of the commiseration responses fell into what Wolfson (1988) has termed "The Bulge." That is to say, most of them occurred among status equals with neither minimal nor maximal social distance. This was true for friends particularly, but also sometimes occurred among acquaintances in an attempt to get to know each other better. Neither interlocutors of extreme social distance, such as teacher/student, nor intimates, such as husband/wife, commiserated to the degree that status-equal friends did. It is within "The Bulge" that we are able to see how openers function. Clearly, with intimates there is no need to employ speech that entails much negotiation between speaker and addressee. With strangers as well,

such as in service encounters, the negotiated give and take inherent in such speech behavior is outside the expectations of the role relationships.

One can, however, easily imagine instances of IC to strangers in certain settings, such as people standing in line for long periods of time. A momentary solidarity can be established between strangers through the use of ICs: "rapport-inspiring topics are commonly raised as a way of doing the face-threatening act of initiating an encounter with a stranger" (Brown and Levinson, 1978: 117). We see from the data that interlocutors have a quite varied choice of possibility of response to ICs. In the case of standing in line complaining to the stranger in front of you about how slow the line is moving, for example, the expected response might be one of agreement, for it is obvious that the interlocutors share a common plight. Perhaps it is the case that increased social distance creates an increased demand for a response and even more of a demand for a commiseration. If so, The Bulge will become skewed. The larger corpus should show more clearly if indeed a commiseration response is more common among interlocutors who are strangers than those who know one another.

By becoming aware of how to use conversational openers such as ICs as a strategy, interpret them for what they are, and respond in an appropriate manner, learners can make use of such knowledge to go beyond the acquaintance stage with their native-speaking interlocutors. The negotiation of meaning resulting from such increased interaction should have a two-pronged and circular effect: enhanced social life and enhanced linguistic ability.

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[1]The pilot study on which this paper is based was carried out for a seminar in Language in Power taught by Dr. Nessa Wolfson

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